Writing Oral and Literary Culture

The Case of the Contemporary Moroccan zajal

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Introduction

Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1374) is considered one of the giants of the medieval Arabic literary tradition. He published dozens of books on a wide range of topics from medicine to Islamic mysticism, and philosophy to history. His mastery of Arabic was without peer. He was a poet and an important high government official in the Nasrid court of Granada, as well as a luminary figure in Merinid North Africa. In short, he is, quite literally, one of the last words of the high cultural tradition of medieval Muslim Spain (al-Andalus) and North Africa. Less known today, or at least less celebrated, is the fact that he composed a number of *zajals* (strophic poems using the local Andalusī dialect) on various topics including praise for the Nasrid sultan Muḥammad v (r. 1354–1359 and 1362–1391) (Elinson 2010). He was not the only high court official to dabble in the *zajal* arts. His student (who would become a co-conspirator in his murder) Ibn Zamrak (d. 1394), whose *qaṣīdas* grace the walls of Spain's most conspicuous homage to the glorious Andalusī past in the Alhambra, composed a number of *zajals* as well (Corriente 1990). Also in the fourteenth century in Morocco, a poet by the name of al-Kafīf al-Zarhūnī accompanied the Merinid sultan Abū al-Ḥassān on a tour of his lands in Morocco in the early 1300s, and composed a five hundred verse *zajal* in Moroccan Arabic (*dārīja*) describing every detail of the journey and praising the sultan. It is interesting to note that none of these examples of *zajal* poetry in the halls of officialdom seemed to raise any eyebrows at the time. They are recorded in literary and historical works without hesitation. In fact, the fourteenth century saw a flourishing of *zajal* and other colloquial forms in the official realm in al-Andalus and medieval North Africa (Bensherifa 1987: 10). However, this is not to say that literary critics and scholars always accepted non-classical strophic poetry as a legitimate poetic form. In fact, its popularity waxed and waned.

Ibn Bassām of Santerém (d. 1147) chose *not* to include examples of *muwashshaḥs* (a strophic poetic form related to the *zajal* in its structure and inclusion of colloquial Arabic) in his literary anthology *al-Dhakhīra fī maḥāsīn ahl al-jazīra* (Treasury of the Charms of the People of the Iberian Peninsula)

due to the fact that their “meters ... are beyond the limits of our book, as the majority of them are not composed according to the metrical schemes (*a‘ārīḍ*) of the poems of the Arabs” (Ibn Bassām 1939: 2). While he does not include the non-classical strophic form in this Andalusī literary anthology, the fact that he feels the need to justify its omission indicates that it was well known and somewhat popular at the time.

Although the Andalusī *zajal* enjoyed some popularity during the Almoravid period (1040–1147) and in the subsequent Almohad period (1121–1269), “[t]he *zajal* is soon barred from literary consideration and confined to folkloric use, and even the *muwashshaḥ* loses ground and ends up by being an occasional exercise for some poets” (Corriente 1991: 66). Nonetheless, by the fourteenth century, strophic poetry in general, and the *zajal* form in particular, comes into its own as an accepted genre of written artistic expression; maybe not held equal to the classical tradition, but a viable literary option to be considered alongside it. In the introduction to his famous work of history, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) states:

The great mass took to [the *muwashshaḥ*] because of its smoothness, artistic language, and the (many) internal rhymes found in it (which made them popular). As a result, the common people in the cities imitated them. They made poems of the (*muwashshaḥ*) type in their sedentary dialect (*bi-lughatihim al-ḥaḍariyya*), without employing vowel endings. They thus invented a new form, which they called *zajal*. They have continued to compose poems of this type down to this time. They achieved remarkable things in it. The (*zajal*) opened a wide field for eloquent (poetry) in the (Spanish-Arabic) dialect, which is influenced by non-Arab (speech habits) (*bi-ḥasbi lughatihim al-musta‘jima*).

IBN KHALDŪN 1958:454

Although it is important not to overstate the extent to which dialectal Arabic was accepted in the Arabic literary and cultural canon in the pre-modern period, the fact that it *was* included and discussed is significant. That the giants of the Arabic cultural tradition such as Ibn al-Khaṭīb and Ibn Khaldūn accepted and praised works in dialect points to a certain level of ambivalence between the use of Standard Arabic and colloquial in writing in the fourteenth century.¹

¹ Similar things were happening in other parts of Europe during this same period. In 1303–1304, Dante wrote his *De vulgari eloquentia*, praising vernacular literature and claiming its high eloquence over the grammatical standard. He concludes Book I of the work with these

The medieval *zajal* and its contemporary iteration represents an interesting intersection of written and oral (often conflated as high and low) literatures, straddling as it does the boundary between linguistic and literary registers, and challenging accepted notions of modernity and definitions of cultural literacy. Thus, the contemporary *zajal* serves as an interesting entry point into the discussion of the use of colloquial Arabic in writing. The *zajal* as it is practiced today in Morocco is not a fixed or single poetic form, but rather, includes practically any poetry or lyric composed in *dārija*, regardless of its performative context (oral and/or written) and varied cultural, historical, social, and literary underpinnings. I will discuss the form in more detail below, but suffice it to say that the *zajal* displays broad linguistic and ideological heterogeneity, as do its practitioners and critics.

The contemporary Moroccan *zajal* is often touted as an authentic (*aṣīl*) Moroccan form that best articulates and expresses the Moroccan 'soul'. In fact, it is just such a search for "its authentic national character (*ṭab'ihā al-qawmī al-aṣīl*)" (Jirārī 1970: 1) that encouraged 'Abbās al-Jirārī to undertake his ambitious and important book on the Moroccan *zajal*, the first full length academic study dedicated to the contemporary Moroccan *zajal* (initially a doctoral dissertation conspicuously completed in Egypt rather than Morocco). For al-Jirārī, "folk literature provides an image of the national character ... that is clearer than the image that is reflected in cultured, educated literature" (Jirārī 1970). So, despite al-Jirārī's interest in Moroccan colloquial literature and his noble desire to subject it to rigorous scholarly study, his project is predicated on an opposition between high and low, lettered and unlettered, national and transnational. While he puts forth a defense of Moroccan folk literature and an assertion of its equality, even its superiority over higher forms of literature in terms of reflecting and articulating true 'Moroccan-ness', his assertion assumes that lettered and unlettered cultures are cleanly separated, and that one is more authentic than the other.

While al-Jirārī's study is revolutionary in its subject matter and breadth, his valorization of the *zajal* as an 'authentic' Moroccan art form nonetheless risks relegating it to the margins of the high literary tradition, and reminds us that the stamp of authenticity and celebration of folkloric forms is often a reaction *against* certain notions of modernity (learned and literate) that are in fact, at the same time 'traditional' and 'modern'. However, what is articulated in and

words: "Now of the two the nobler is the vernacular: first because it is the first language ever spoken by mankind; second because the whole world uses it through diverse pronunciations and forms; finally because it is natural to us while the other is more the product of art." Quoted in Menocal 1993: 101. See Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*.

through the *zajal* is fully modern, and it challenges standard, more conservative definitions of what 'authentic Moroccan' means. It is through the vaunting and strengthening of *dārija*'s written culture that contemporary Moroccan *zajal* poets and critics aim to re-appropriate 'the tradition' in order to express a fully modern Morocco. As Regina Bendix notes:

The quest for authenticity is a peculiar longing, at once modern and antimodern. It is oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity. As such, it can be understood within the framework of reflexive modernization.

BENDIX 1997: 8

It is ironic that the popular notion of the *zajal* as a folk form that is 'authentically' Moroccan has been challenged over the past three decades by contemporary Moroccan *zajal* poets themselves who seek legitimacy for the *zajal* as a more widely accepted poetic form to be considered alongside poetry composed in Standard Arabic, as well as other accepted literary languages (for example, French or English). It is this very conscious positioning of the contemporary Moroccan *zajal* within the broader literary landscape that interests me here, specifically how *zajal* poets and critics view its writing, publication, and performance. In this essay, I will examine the *zajal* from a historical, aesthetic, and ideological perspective in order to analyze and evaluate its place in the current debates that are occurring in Morocco regarding the use of *dārija* in writing. I consider the form's history and literary critical works on it, as well as the views of several *zajal* poets and critics vis à vis the use of Moroccan *dārija* in writing.

Speaking and Writing Arabic

Discussions of the use of colloquial Arabic in writing have been occurring in many parts of the Arab world for well over a century (see Fahmy 2011; Plonka 2004 and 2006 for a historical view of these debates in Egypt and Lebanon respectively). In Morocco, this is also not an entirely new discussion, but it has only really been in the last ten to fifteen years that it has gained real traction in the press, on television, and within scholarly circles (Elinson 2013 and citations therein). For its part, the *zajal* has been around in one form or another for quite some time, at least since the tenth century, and some of its earliest examples have been written and included in the literary canon. Although there is a continuity of sorts from the pre-modern *zajal* form to the contemporary period,

the contemporary Moroccan *zajal* as a written poetic form with no set rhyme scheme or meter is a free verse form closely related to similarly free verse in *fuṣḥā*, and it is a much more recent phenomenon that, I would argue, emerged out of a particular context of linguistic change in Morocco where proponents of expanding the use of *dārija* in the written realm have been challenging standard language ideologies that would prefer to preserve the *fuṣḥā/dārija* – Standard/non-Standard division of labor in the Arabic language.

Beginning as far back as the mid-1970s, and really taking off in the early-to mid-2000s, discussion has escalated around the topic of writing in *dārija*. During this time, technological advances, most notably e-mail, texting, and the use of social media, as well as the establishment of new, private radio outlets has encouraged an expanding use of *dārija* in numerous contexts, including writing of various forms and genres. It is difficult to speak of any sort of a ‘movement’, as activists, scholars, journalists, translators, playwrights, and novelists who are actively working toward greater recognition of *dārija* as a legitimate language able to fulfill all linguistic functions may very well be aware of one another, but are not, for the most part, actually working together toward a single, common goal. Their activities often intersect in many contexts, but they operate largely independent of one another (Miller 2014). A community that *can* be considered a rather cohesive movement is that of contemporary Moroccan *zajal* poets and critics. These enthusiasts of the *zajal* interact in person at *zajal* performances and festivals, on various websites devoted to the exchange of poetry and criticism,² on Facebook, and through their rather robust published output. In these forums, they discuss and promote *dārija* as an artistic language entitled to the same respect as *fuṣḥā* and other standard world languages.

The *zajal*, both the medieval form and its contemporary iteration, occupies an interesting ‘grey area’ between oral and written literature. While its colloquial language, rhythm, and structure strongly connect it to the oral tradition (Rāshiq 2008), *zajal* poets are writing, publishing, and advocating for the form’s acceptance as a legitimate written poetic form as never before. The contemporary Moroccan *zajal* is neither an entirely oral, nor entirely written form, but rather, each of these two ‘faces’ relies on the other to comprise a complete and ideal *zajal*. It is this janus-like quality of the *zajal* that I will explore in the remainder of this essay.

2 See, for example, www.zajal-lemsyeh.com (*zajal* poet Ahmed Lemsyeh’s website), <http://montada-zajalmaghrib.ahlamontada.com> (an online forum of *zajal* poet’s and critics).

Language Ideology in Morocco and Elsewhere

Journalists, academics, intellectuals, and others have weighed in on the role and status of *dārija* and *fuṣṣḥā* in numerous spheres of Moroccan life including culture, education, literature, and journalism. Central to these discussions is whether or not there exists a clear division of labor between *dārija* and *fuṣṣḥā* – which “is just how it is: *no justification is needed*” (J. Milroy 2001: 535) – that either must be defended or challenged. Languages consist of more than one linguistic register, and what becomes the standard is no accident. Rather, that determination is a conscious social, economic, and political project that favors and supports one form of a language over others. This support results in the ‘raising’ of the standard, and the concomitant ‘lowering’ of anything that is *not* the standard. This is not a natural linguistic phenomenon, but rather, one that is planned and ideologically driven. Writing about standard language ideology in English, Milroy and Milroy clearly articulate the idea that

[t]he effect of codification and prescription has been to *legitimize* the norms of formal registers of Standard English rather than the norms of everyday spoken English. Codifiers have legislated and prescribers have tried to put the legislation into effect. One result of this is that there is a general belief that there is only one form of the correct, i.e. legitimate, English, and a feeling that colloquial and non-standard forms are perverse and deliberate deviations from what is approved by ‘law’; i.e. they are ‘illegitimate’.

MILROY 1998: 30

Despite the fact that ideas about language are not fixed or absolute, speakers of a given language often believe them to be so, and that their language is “*a clearly delimited perfectly uniform and perfectly stable variety* – a variety that is never perfectly and consistently realized in spoken use” (J. Milroy 2001: 543). In the case of Arabic, the prestige of Standard Arabic (*fuṣṣḥā*) is attributable to its close links to the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition, which, from a theological standpoint, represents the ideal form of the Arabic language.³ This, combined with Standard Arabic’s importance in the nineteenth and twentieth century Arabic *nahḍa* (renaissance) and the rise of pan-Arab nationalist ide-

3 It is important to remember that the word *fuṣṣḥā* means ‘the purest’ – a value judgment rather than an objective linguistic one; *zajal* poets I spoke with prefer the term *mu’arraba* – fully Arabized, or vowelised – because it is more descriptive than normative.

ology based on, among other things, a unified and unifying Arabic language (Suleiman 2003) that has been “used in the creation and representation of various social and cultural identities (e.g. nationalism, ethnicity)” (Kroskrity 2004: 509), has assured Standard Arabic’s place at the top of the linguistic totem pole. This hierarchy is reinforced daily in schools, mosques, on television and radio, and elsewhere. Despite a tacit acceptance of non-classical forms in the medieval period, I would argue that the contemporary period has witnessed an ideological hardening against the acceptance of colloquial forms into literary circles. The modern education system continues to be predicated on all sorts of forms of categorization and standardization that, as Bourdieu puts it has “helped to devalue popular modes of expression, dismissing them as ‘slang’ and ‘gibberish’ ... and to impose recognition of the legitimate language” (Bourdieu 1991: 49). As the important Arab nationalist thinker George Antonius underlines in *The Arab Awakening*, it is the school that provides the linguistic and cultural underpinnings of the modern nation and, “[w]ithout school or book, the making of a nation is in modern times inconceivable” (Antonius 1938: 40).

Despite this seemingly ‘stable’ linguistic situation, Moroccan *dārīja* is appearing increasingly in contexts and forms that have been traditionally associated with Standard Arabic. In writing, and in discussions of writing and literacy, the apparent division between Standard Arabic and *dārīja* is breaking down, or at the very least, shifting. This does not imply that *dārīja* is poised to replace Standard Arabic entirely, nor is that the intention of the poets. Nonetheless, language change is occurring on numerous levels in Morocco from top-down policy and academic debates on the feasibility and suitability of ‘allowing’ *dārīja* into the realm of the written word and official discourse, to bottom-up, spontaneous examples of *dārīja* being written in various writing genres by a cross-section of Moroccan society.

Zajal

Poetry composed in colloquial Arabic has a long history, with some of the earliest examples of its written form going back to al-Andalus. The Andalusī *zajal*, of which Ibn Quzmān of Cordoba (d. 1160) was its most famous, although not first, practitioner, is a strophic poetic form that uses an elevated level of Andalusī colloquial Arabic. The *zajal* overlapped considerably with the classical *qaṣīda*, utilizing conventional tropes (wine and garden imagery, descriptions of the beloved) and themes (praise, panegyric, invective), and thus fulfilling similar functions to it. However, it was the strophic form, non-classical meters, and

hybrid language (*fuṣḥā*, *‘ammīyya*, Romance, and Berber) that set the *zajal* apart from the classical *qaṣīda*. Despite this non-classical linguistic heterogeneity, the form has long been linked with the written tradition, and thus cannot be considered a ‘folk’ or ‘un-learned’ form. In the introduction to his *dīwān*, written in elevated Arabic rhymed prose, Ibn Quzmān explains how to compose and write *zajal* lyrics, saying that the inclusion of case endings (*al-‘irāb*) “is the ugliest thing that can be included in a *zajal*, weightier than eternal death”. He goes on to say that, “even grammatical errors in the vowelled speech of *qaṣīdas* and *muwashshaḥs* are not as ugly as including case endings in the *zajal*” (Ibn Quzmān 1980: 3). Ibn Quzmān may have avoided case endings, but he was harshly criticized by the medieval *zajal* critic and theorist, Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (d. 1348) for *not* using *‘ammīyya* in his *zajals*, thus violating the *zajal*’s stricture on the use of “pure Arabic (*al-lughā al-‘arabiyya al-faṣīḥa*)” (Ḥillī 1981: 63. See also Radwan 2012: 16 and Zwartjes 1997: 51–54).

In addition to Ibn Quzmān’s *dīwān*, there are scattered examples of medieval *zajals* having been written down and recorded in *dīwāns*, historical writings, and other collections. However, examples of early Moroccan *zajal* poetry that have been written down are, according to Muḥammad Rāshiq, relatively few. In fact, he counts only four complete *zajal* collections dating from the ninth century when the *zajal* first appears to 1976 when *zajal* poet Ahmed Lemsyeh published *Riyāḥ ... al-latī sa-ta’tī* (Rāshiq n.d.). However, one should not be tempted to overemphasize the extent to which the pre-modern *zajal* remained unwritten, as Rāshiq’s low count only refers to complete collections. He argues for the importance of documenting the largely oral *zajal* form so as to save it from disappearing entirely, and underlines the importance of both written and oral forms, and the registers that characterize them as

forming the social framework for individual speech that is done in one of two forms: spoken or written, and that the language of the *zajal* has developed and continued to develop over the generations so that it does not solidify and die, and its poets do not suffer from the language barrier that prevents communication and verbal interaction.

RĀSHIQ n.d.

The Zajal between Orality and Writing

The written and published *zajal* poses a challenge to Standard Arabic’s monopoly over literate culture, and this challenge represents nothing less than a linguistic revolution. Thematically, *zajals* have often served as a vehicle for polit-

ical critique. Indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s, the *zajal* was overtly politically engaged; the product of a particularly heated political moment in Morocco and the rest of the Arab world when Marxist/leftist movements sought political and social change under autocratic post-colonial rulers, and expressed solidarity with the Palestinian cause. As time went on, the *zajal* threw off its overtly political mantle to explore more aesthetically focused and experimental poetic realms. Nonetheless, the *zajal* forms what can only be called a “resistance to dominant representations [that] occurs in two ways: when devalued linguistic strategies and genres are practices despite denigration, and when these devalued practices propose or embody alternate models of the social world” (Gal 1989: 349, quoted in Kapchan 2001:140).

In 1976, the poet Ahmed Lemsyeh published *Riyāḥ ... al-llatī sa-ta'tī* (The Winds of ... that Will Come), a collection of *zajal* poetry that broke existing boundaries between oral and written poetry; it was the first full *dīwān* of *zajal* poetry published in Morocco in the modern era. Although not the first ever example of a written *zajal* in the contemporary period,⁴ this *dīwān* is considered by many to be the harbinger of a new type of *zajal* poetry, one that is closely aligned with poetry contemporary to it composed in *fushā*, and it “defined a new modernist course in our time” (Rāshiq 2005). This poetic experiment clearly articulated and emphasized that, despite the popular view that oral and written literature, specifically poetry in *dārija* and Standard Arabic, are and should remain two completely separate literary forms with their own sets of conventions, themes, and goals, there is indeed much overlap between the two; in fact, locating the division between the two (thematically, formally, and even linguistically) is much more difficult than first appears.

That there are distinct differences between oral literature (often associated with less-learned folk forms) and written (often associated with learned prestige forms) is not at all absolute. In his study of the fourteenth century epic *zajal* of al-Kafif al-Zarhūnī (14th century), Moroccan literary scholar Saʿīd Yaqṭīn asserts that

4 *Zajals* had been published in *al-Muḥarrir* (the newspaper of the political party *al-Ittiḥād al-ishtirākī li-l-quwāt al-shaʿbiyya* until the paper was shut down by the government in 1981), *al-Ittiḥād al-ishtirākī* (the newspaper that took *al-Muḥarrir*'s place), and other news and cultural publications. For an exhaustive list of published *zajal dīwāns*, studies, articles, and texts, see the bibliography compiled by (Mehdi Ouadghiri) in a special issue of *Āfāq* (the journal of the Moroccan Writers' Union) 3/4 (1992), 93–110. A quick glance at this bibliography shows that after a few published examples of *zajal* poems and criticism in the 1970s, publishing activity really takes off in the 1980s and 1990s.

if we move beyond the dichotomous genre separation of culture into 'learned' and 'popular', and instead interact with culture as a whole comprised of branches, we would see that when we closely examine popular culture, we find that it does not differ considerably from what makes up learned culture.

YAQTĪN n.d.

While strict taxonomy of oral/folk vs. written/literate forms would make for a 'neater' organization of the literary canon, there is, in fact, much overlap between the two; we have many examples of orally-inspired folk literature having been written down, both drawing from, and inspiring high literary forms, and high forms, for their part, drawing upon folk forms and contexts. Whereas the arbiters of high Arabic culture would prefer not to include colloquial literature in the canon,

'orality' and 'literacy' are not two separate and independent things; nor (to put it more concretely) are oral and written modes two mutually exclusive and opposed processes for representing and communicating information. On the contrary they take diverse forms in differing cultures and periods, are used differently in different social contexts and, insofar as they can be distinguished at all as separate modes rather than a continuum, they mutually interact and affect each other, and the relations between them are problematic rather than self-evident.

FINNEGAN 2013: 175

Following Ahmed Lemsyeh's publication of *Riyāḥ ... al-latī sa-ta'tī* in 1976, the writing and publication of *zajal* poetry exploded. As Murād al-Qādirī (Mourad Qadery) points out, the number of published *dīwāns* "went from three in the 1970s ... to more than forty in the 1990s, to double that number in the following decade, approaching one hundred" (Qādirī 2013: 8). Muḥammad Bū Sitta counts over 280 diwans through 2011 (Bū Sitta 2014: 37). Most of these works are either self-published or mostly self-published, which indicates that the publishing industry in Morocco does not view the publication of *zajal* poetry as a profitable venture worth investing in. Indeed this is true for most literary genres in Morocco, as book sales in general are rather anemic with print runs of one or two hundred to, at the most, a thousand.⁵ In addition to published *dīwāns*,

5 I was told by one *zajal* poet that a best case scenario would be for a publishing house to split the cost of publishing with a poet if they see any commercial potential. Even this division of costs is rare, though.

poets also use Facebook as a medium for writing and diffusing *zajal* poetry, posting new material prior to or instead of more formal publication, or posting already published work which results in many comments and the constant re-referencing of older work, thus ensuring that the physical publication of a print *dīwān* is only one stage in its life, not always the final one.

It is important to emphasize, though, that the mere act of writing something down, and even publishing it, does not necessarily mean that it represents an example of writing or literate culture, i.e. culture connected to learned, written tradition, rather than the oral. It is not necessarily true that all written *zajals* are considered part of literary (i.e. literate) tradition. Nor should the written *zajal* be considered an accurate recording of orally conceived and composed literature. Contemporary Moroccan *zajal* poetry can be divided into two broad categories: *zajals* composed with an “oral mentality”, i.e. drawing from Moroccan oral culture and meant to be performed orally such as the *malhūn* (Magidow 2013), *ʿayṭa* (Najmī 2007), and the sung poetry of groups such as Nass el-Ghiwane and Jil al-Jilala (Ḥannūn 2007), and *zajals* that are composed with an intellectual or “writing mentality” (*al-ʿaqliyya al-kitābiyya*) that draw from all manner of world intellectual culture – philosophical, religious, literary, historical, etc. This latter type of *zajal*, which some bemoan as being the exception of what is currently being produced rather than the norm, requires education and book knowledge in order to compose, read, understand, and appreciate it. The fact that this poetry is written in *dārija* does not at all imply or assume that it is aimed at people with little or no education for whom reading in Standard Arabic, French, or some other standard language is all but impossible. In fact, the contemporary Moroccan *zajal* is not aimed for those whose understanding of Arabic is limited to *dārija*. Rather, this poetry is intended for those who do, and must understand the nuances of literary expression, and who possess a literacy that extends well beyond basic reading skills. The contemporary *zajal* (or *qaṣīda zajaliyya*), is a strong assertion of *dārija*’s ability to express even the most complex ideas, contrary to those who would say that *dārija* is only suitable for certain contexts, and that Standard Arabic is the linguistic level most suitable for ‘high’ literature and the expression of complex topics. Thus, the contemporary Moroccan *zajal* has inserted itself into the language ideology debates that have been occurring across print and television media in recent years.

Zajal Voices

Contemporary Moroccan *zajal* poets, critics, and enthusiasts are quite outspoken when it comes to their views on reading, writing, and publishing about this

poetic form. Whether in online forums, news articles (online and print), Facebook posts, introductions to published *zajal* *dīwāns*, academic studies, and in the words of *zajals* themselves, the *zajal* community is interested in promoting the *zajal* and defending it as a legitimate, written poetic form. In interviews and at events devoted to the *zajal*, the common refrain is that the contemporary Moroccan *zajal* is poetry like any other, and should be evaluated and appreciated as such. Many *zajal* poets also compose *qaṣīdas* in Standard Arabic and insist that linguistic register is determined not by conscious choice, but rather, by what the poetic context requires. In this section, I will present a number of important voices in the contemporary Moroccan *zajal* scene focusing specifically on what they have to say about “this poetry’s ... permanent preoccupation with the concepts, questions, and anxieties of writing” (Bendahmane 2009). As mentioned above, the number of *zajal* poets who are writing and publishing is growing at an impressive rate. I do not claim to include close to all the *zajal* voices that can be heard in Morocco. Here I present but four voices who represent no more than a small sample, but nonetheless are prominent poets in the *zajal* scene.

Idrīs Misnāwī (Driss Mesnaoui) (b. 1948) is an extremely productive *zajal* poet, a strong proponent of the *zajal* form, and a firm believer in the expressive beauty of *dārīja* and its appropriateness for all forms of expression. Mesnaoui worked as a high school teacher from 1967 until 2006, and is now retired and living in his hometown of Tiflet (in northwestern Morocco) where he devotes considerable energy to writing and encouraging others in the *zajal* form. He has played an important role in the promotion of the Moroccan *zajal*, having published twenty-seven *zajal* collections to date, and is one of the founders of the ‘Moroccan Association for the *Zajal*’ (*al-Rābiṭa al-Maghribiyya li-l-Zajal*) established in 1996. He also served as the association’s first president. In addition to his importance as a *zajal* poet, he published his first novel in *dārīja* in 2009 entitled *Ta’irwurūt* (Rose), which he describes first and foremost as ‘stories’ (*te’awid*), and then parenthetically as a novel (*riwāya*), underlining the novel’s relationship to oral culture, and his assertion that what he is producing is a new, novel, form. Since then he has published three more novels in *dārīja* – *Ukkaz r-rih* (The Wind’s Crutch) in 2013, *Sa’d l-belda* (The Town’s Lucky Star) in 2014, and *Abwāḥ l-būḥ* (Tablets of Confession) in 2015. These novelistic works boldly push the boundaries of acceptable novelistic language, and aim to focus attention on people, places, and histories not often included in what would be considered more conventionally conceived novels. He has also written and staged a number of theatrical plays.

In response to those who would claim that *dārīja* is limited in terms of function and expressive potential, Mesnaoui is bold in his assertion that “Moroccan

dārija is the most fertile, most lofty, most pure, most eloquent (*afṣaḥ*), and most simple Arabic dialect” (Misnāwī 2013: 312), and he speaks of *dārija*’s rich vocabulary that draws from multiple “dictionaries” (the dictionary of the mountains, of sand dunes, of plains and forests, of oases and river valleys, lakes and waterfalls). The conspicuous use of the word *afṣaḥ*, ‘most eloquent’, along with the string of superlatives often used to describe Standard Arabic’s superior linguistic status, all aim to challenge the accepted wisdom that there is only *one* possible Standard, suitable for all formal situations. In the context of expressive writing, Mesnaoui turns the relative values of *dārija* and Standard Arabic upside down, arguing that *dārija* is the superior of the two. It is generally accepted in a standard language culture that, because it must be learned in school,

there is an understandable tendency for people to believe that writing [in the standard language] is somehow more complicated and difficult (and more important) than speech. The *functional* importance of literacy in the development of Western civilization has been so great that very high values are placed on the written channel, and it is usually considered (implicitly or explicitly) to be ‘superior’ to speech.

MILROY 1998: 55

Mesnaoui boldly challenges this notion. Whereas writing and the written register, according to standard language ideology, is considered superior to speech because of that fact that it is more difficult and must be learned, and because of the importance and status with which literacy imbues writing, Mesnaoui alters the criteria. In comparing *dārija* and Standard Arabic within the context of poetic and emotional expression, *dārija* is the purer, more expressive, and freer linguistic register because of its *simplicity* and closeness to Moroccans’ daily life.

The importance of writing (that he means writing in *dārija* is strongly implied) is a theme that runs throughout Mesnaoui’s work. In a particularly strong example that evokes the first Qur’anic revelation’s command to recite (*Iqra’!*) (*Sūrat al-‘Alaq*), Mesnaoui imbues this poem with a timeless, authoritative force. He exhorts the reader to

Write! Compose *zajals*!
Dance for the ghosts on high
Shake for the lower spirits
Make waves for the forgotten graves
Bring life to the cities’ bones
Light nature’s beauty color by color

Cast out from the living dead and from the buried living
the tongue's pain the letter's pain the string's pain

MISNĀWĪ 2009: 49

Ahmed Lemsyeh (b. 1950) is considered another of the pillars and leading voices of the contemporary Moroccan *zajal*. He has published poetry in both *fuṣṣḥā* and *dārija*, and, like Mesnaoui, Lemsyeh is a strong proponent of the *zajal* form, taking every opportunity he can to talk about it, praise it, promote it, and tout its beauty and power. He is the author of twenty-four published *dīwāns* to date and his work has been translated into many languages. When he published *Riḡāḥ ... al-llatī sa-ta'tī* in 1976, Lemsyeh admitted that it was an experiment undertaken deliberately yet hesitantly, and was perhaps inspired by popular cultural and artistic movements being articulated during the same time in *dārija* by musical super-groups such as Nass el-Ghiwane and Jil al-Jilala. Lemsyeh would not publish another *zajal dīwān* until *Shkūn ṭraz l-mā?* (Who embroidered the water?), published in 1994. This is not to say that he was not keeping busy in the *zajal* world in those eighteen years. Soon after the publication of *Riḡāḥ*, Lemsyeh published an article in the newspaper *al-Muḥarrir* defending the writing of *zajals* and refuting the argument that writing is a zero-sum game in which more *dārija* writing necessarily comes at the expense of *fuṣṣḥā*, a charge that is common among self-appointed defenders of *fuṣṣḥā* (Lemsyeh 1977). Also, between 1976 and the early 1990s, Lemsyeh published over twenty *zajal* poems in the pages of various newspapers including *al-Muḥarrir*, *al-Ittiḥād al-Ishtirākī*, *al-Balāgh al-Maghribī*, and *al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya al-'Ummāliyya*.

In 1992, in what is considered by many to be a watershed event in the *zajal*'s quest for literary acceptance, a double issue of *Āfāq*, the journal of the Moroccan Writers' Union (*Ittiḥād kuttāb al-Maghrib*), was devoted to the topic of the contemporary Moroccan *zajal*. With a critical introduction by Lemsyeh and poems by leading *zajal* poets including Driss Mesnaoui, Ahmed Taïb Lalj, Hasan Mufti, Murad Qadery and others, this special issue was the most substantial critical publication to date to treat this poetic form since Jirāri's study was published in 1970.

Lemsyeh's introduction poses a number of questions concerning the relationship of poetry composed in *dārija* to that composed in *fuṣṣḥā* – Is it an Oedipal relationship? Should one be favored over the other? Are they in competition with one another (Lemsyeh 1992)? These are crucial questions that Lemsyeh presents to the reader, but does not himself provide answers to, although he does make it quite clear that he believes *dārija* and *fuṣṣḥā* should be placed on equal footing. He asserts that

the texts that we will read attempt to refute the idea that spoken Arabic (*al-‘ammīyya*) is incapable of expressing poetry. It is well known that poetry can be either absent or present, whether in *fuṣṣḥā* poetry, or in the *zajal* ... and that emerging from the clay of *dārīja* does not mean we should treat it harshly; rather, it should mean the raising of this clay to poetry’s damned fire.

LEMSYEH 1992

On the relationship between the oral and literary qualities of the *zajal*, Lemsyeh acknowledges that both are important. Although he is clearly passionate about having the written *zajal* recognized as a legitimate poetic form in Morocco, he is also quite clear on the *zajal*’s oral roots, and the need for the *zajal* to be performed orally. Despite the plethora of published *zajal* works, Lemsyeh views the published *dīwān* as incomplete in that it lacks the elements that “complete” the *zajal*. These elements are performative, and can only occur at poetry recitals and events; they include music, applause, sighs of appreciation, critical discussions, and even artistic arguments and disagreements. On the one hand, Lemsyeh aims to inject the *zajal text* with a fully independent existence from the ephemeral spoken word. On the other hand, while full independence is theoretically possible, it is not necessarily preferable. Thus, a text’s performance is as integral to its being as is the printed text. Written (learned) and oral (folk) cultures come together in the *zajal*, and in it, Lemsyeh and others preserve both the oral and literary roots of the genre, “repeating and recycling the oral repertoire into the written work ... thereby infusing the written word – associated with high culture – with the images and metaphors of oral folk performance.” (Kapchan 2001:133).

Finally, Lemsyeh makes it clear that he “does not want the contemporary *zajal* to become numb with shallowness, nor does he wish to promote the vulgar notion that [it] is [only] for the masses, and poetry in *fuṣṣḥā* is [only] for the elite, striving for satisfaction in the audience’s applause. [He wants] the *zajal* to be considered on its own merits” (Lemsyeh 1992: 12). For Lemsyeh, the oral and the written word are one, and writing – no matter the register – is what makes everything manifestly clear:

Words are not a bed and a covering
 Words are a road, and the people are letters.
 Words are not right and wrong
 Words are a spring whose water overflows.
 Paper is a shroud sewn with white thread
 And with writing, it becomes an eye that sees.

LEMSYEH 1994

In a clear statement of where he places the *zajal*, Hasan al-Mufti (d. 2008) (who was also a well-known song lyricist and television writer) states: “I picture the *zajal* poem (*al-qaṣīda al-zajaliyya*) to be essentially a written art. I only write it with the expectation that someone will read it, not hear it” (Mufti 2010, vol. 1: 9). Although al-Mufti clearly views his *zajals* as written compositions, the language is a hybrid of standard and spoken Arabic, not unlike the language used in much *zajal* poetry. In his introduction to Mufti’s collected works, Lemsyeh describes the *zajal* language as “a *barzakh* language” (Mufti 2010, vol. 2: preface) referring both to the concrete meaning of *barzakh* as the barrier that exists between salt and fresh water, or between two similar yet opposite qualities, and the eschatological meaning of the place between the material and the spiritual worlds. Just as the *barzakh* marks the indistinguishable division at which salt water becomes fresh, and where the material moves into the spiritual and vice versa, the *zajal* is made up of two (or more) linguistic registers that flow one into the other without clear distinction.

Nouhad Benaguida’s (b. 1974) experience with the *zajal* is, in many ways, a series of firsts. Following the publication of her *dīwān*, *‘Alāsh ḥereshti l-ḥuzn?* (Why did you cause such sadness?) in 1998, she released Morocco’s first *zajal* recording, *Hā wajhī wa-hā wajhak* (Here’s my face, and here’s yours) in 2003. Soon after this, she established the first website of its kind in Morocco devoted to the *zajal* which consisted of *zajal* texts, as well as sound recordings of readings (Benaguida 2012), and in 2007 she published the first anthology of Moroccan *zajal* poetry, *Majma‘ al-kalām* (Collection of Words). Benaguida is currently the host of the extremely popular nightly television talk show *Qīṣṣat al-nās* (Peoples’ Stories) on MediTV. In a television interview following the publication of *Majma‘ al-kalām*, Benaguida discusses the role and status of *dārija*. She praises the colloquial language of the *zajal* both for its simplicity and wide understandability, and for its appropriateness as a poetic medium. On the poets she includes in her anthology and the language they use, she says:

These poets write in the people’s language and they live the people’s concerns, expressing and touching upon issues of daily life in a very simple language, in a language of daily circulation ... but [in this language] there is a poetic quality ... a language full of poetic images, music, overtones, and symbolism, meaning all the elements of the Arabic or western poem.

“Interview with Nouhad Benaguida” 2009

When asked about *dārija*’s status vis-à-vis *fuṣḥā* and the popular notion that *dārija* poetry is second rate, she responds quite simply that, “this could very

well be a problem of the people who say this, not of us, the poets who write in Moroccan *dārija*. On the contrary. I believe that Moroccan Arabic is our true language. The Moroccan *zajal* is the historical register of the Moroccans (*dīwān al-Maghārba*)”⁶ (“Interview with Nouhad Benaguida” 2009).

In a clear nod to Descartes’ “je pense, donc, je suis” and the Sufi concept of oneness with the Eternal, Benaguida articulates her impulse to write, and the connection of writing with the Eternal in this short *zajal*:

I don't write in order to be
nor in order that being come from me
Rather, I write in order to say to you
that before the universe was
I was
always

ELBIAD 2014: 212

Adil Latefi (b. 1983) from Fez is considered one of the leading voices of a new generation of *zajal* poets. He published his first *dīwān*, *Shūfāt l-khātīr* (Views of the Mind) in 2013 and won the first round of the newly established Guerçif Prize, a literary award for the *zajal*, sponsored by the *Hāmish* Association. His second book, published in 2014, is a dual effort with Algerian writer and *zajal* poet Abderrazak Boukebba (b. 1977) entitled *T-Taljnār* (Snowfire), and he has just published (in PDF) *ʿAṭsh yarwī siratuh* (A thirst that tells its own story). He composes poetry in both *dārija* and *fuṣḥā*, and has recently been posting short poems in English on Facebook as well. Like many who write, he views writing as an essential, life-affirming act. In fact, writing is a major theme that runs through his work; that he writes mostly in *dārija* remains unmentioned, as this requires no justification beyond the justification for writing itself. On the back cover of *Shūfāt l-khātīr*, Latefi writes (in *dārija*):

When you write, you're like someone who puts a message in a glass bottle and throws it into the sea. Someone might find the letter, read it, and understand it. Or, he might read it and not understand it. Or maybe no one will find it at all. When you write, you go on an adventure. You gamble. You're stripped naked. You're tortured and appear clearly because of it. “Can you *not* write?” That's the question you pose when you write.

LATEFI 2013

6 Invoking the well-known maxim that “[classical] poetry is the *dīwān* of the Arabs”.

Writing and words possess their own agency and ability to affect change. In the first *zajal* of the collection, “*Bilād* (A Country)” he writes:

I pluck from my self
and plant it
I water it with my blood
Roses grow
that I pick
and say to my country, “take a sniff”
...
I write a word
and bury it
A melody emerges
from the middle of its grave
It sings and says,
“the concerns of my country are my concerns”
...
Words are stopped
and silence speaks
Pens dry out
My insides are in pain
and increase my sickness.
...
I wait for the light of the sun
to shine on my country
I forget yesterday’s tears
My misfortune ceases
I plant my stakes ...
My dream comes true.

LUṬFĪ 2013: 8–10

In “*l-Kitāba ḥayā* (Writing is life)”, writing is both subject and object, actor and acted upon. It is a search for existence through intellectual and experiential effort. “To write is to live, and to live is to be positioned in a riot of questions” (Boukebbba 2014). It is a journey filled with pain, the ultimate goal of which is enlightenment:

Writing is a letter emptying itself with another letter,
a word sings and another word listens
Writing is blood and smell on the sheet of paper, the mind’s wound,

a threshold. Place your forehead upon it if you want the door to open
 and the light to breathe inside of you ...
 a word, a word and a half. Even the errant one is beautified by it, despite
 the fact that the word doesn't hear what it says
 Writing is honey. The honeybee circles the flowers and thorns before
 drawing the nectar from it while it buzzes ...
 a beauty. The mind hunts it with a weapon of longing
 a little bird. A feather grows on it with every question ...
 a sea. Its fish are thirsty, only meaning gives them drink
 a spring. Its water is pure, every one of its drops lights the way, and every
 road leads to
 a door. Its key under the threshold upon which you had placed your
 forehead
 Wash your self in light
 before you open.

LATEFI 2013: 53

Conclusion

Since the early- to mid-2000s in Morocco, the issue of language change, specifically the use of *dārija* in writing, has received a lot of attention in the popular press, on television, and in scholarly circles. These debates often center on broad discussions of Moroccan identity politics, educational reform, and social and political change. The participants in these discussions are often motivated by ideological concerns that aim either to promote the use of *dārija* in writing, or to prevent it. These opposing stances stem from views rooted in Standard Language ideologies that view languages as comprised of inherently stable registers that do not overlap, and assume a social, economic, and ideological bias toward one of those registers. Often, the Standard Language is considered to be the more grammatical, more complicated, written form of a language, whereas the spoken form is typically viewed as simpler, less capable of complex expression, and ultimately, of lower status than the Standard.

The contemporary Moroccan *zajal* provides an interesting intersection of oral and written literature and culture that, while still existing in a Standard Language culture, provides an interesting perspective on writing and writing culture in Morocco. While it takes its name and inspiration from the medieval Andalusī *zajal*, the contemporary Moroccan *zajal* as it is understood in its written form today traces its beginnings to the 1970s and 1980s, really taking off in the 1990s and 2000s, which, it should be noted, corresponds roughly with

rise of broader language discussions in Morocco concerning language change and the use of *dārīja* in writing. Despite its somewhat marginalized status in contemporary literary scene in Morocco, *zajal* poetry and criticism is very much a part of these linguistic and cultural discussions.

As we have seen, *zajal* poets, scholars, and enthusiasts are directly engaged in discussions and debates concerning the status of *dārīja* and the status and literary value of the contemporary Moroccan *zajal*. As this community strives for greater recognition on the Moroccan literary scene, it is vying for the same legitimacy that poetry written in Standard Arabic, French, and other standard languages have long enjoyed. This group bases its arguments not on statistics or research on reading practices and mother-tongue education, but rather, based on aesthetic and expressive considerations. As the most natural linguistic register for a Moroccan, both in terms of expression and in terms of understanding, the *zajal* community considers *dārīja* more valuable and more prestigious in a *zajal* setting. As discussions surround the suitability of *dārīja* for writing continue in Morocco, the *zajal* community is quietly, yet forcefully, making the point that *dārīja* is capable of written expression, and that it is no longer to be limited solely to the spoken register.

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